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ABSTRACT

Foreign language graduate assistants usually lack adequate teaching experience, yet must somehow repay their university for assistantships needed to remain in school. Such neophyte teachers rarely inspire students to continue language study. But the more experienced staff must teach upper-division courses for these same students and the graduate classes largely patronized by the assistants themselves. To alleviate or even eliminate problems of declining enrollment in both upper division and graduate courses, all regular faculty should teach one or more elementary sections, any left unstaffed to be taught by second- or third-year assistants only. Beginners would work under the senior staff correcting examinations, tutoring in grammar and pronunciation, managing laboratories, occasionally teaching classes during professors' unavoidable absences, etc. Assistants would attend special training courses. Raising low enrollments is even simpler. Besides returning more experienced teachers to the bread-and-butter classes which eventually produce majors, language departments should stop catering to older professors and flattering the younger by giving them their favorite courses, however unnecessary or peripheral the courses are to sound language programs. One or two advanced or graduate classes each should be the limit. This plan promises better-taught elementary sections, better-trained and more skillfully utilized assistants, higher advanced enrollments, and no increase in staff.
(Author/CLK)

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Using Foreign Language Graduate Assistants More Productively

Some forty years teaching foreign languages and literatures to undergraduates and graduates alike in two large university departments; working with assistants in managing an elementary French program for several years; post-doctoral study in teaching beginners; and even a few pedagogical articles give me, I hope, the right if not the expertise to make the following observations on certain failings of graduate assistant programs and possible remedies for them.

I admit at the outset to doubts concerning the originality of any systems or solutions, or even the likelihood of their unqualified success. I also suspect that a new emphasis almost inevitably entails slippage in some other area: a marked improvement in speaking ability, let us say, usually being bought with coin formerly spent on reading skills or the like. Traders do not necessarily get rich. Furthermore, I am probably to be counted among the moderates if not the conservatives. But however sceptical and/or reactionary, I genuinely feel that the following plan will effect a considerable improvement in the teaching of elementary classes. No scheme can be expected to perform miracles; no scheme can quite counter-balance poor teaching, but it can palliate its shortcomings, improve the efficiency and logic and quality of a program. That perhaps is enough.

First, let us size up the nature and dimensions of the problem at hand. Simply stated, it is tripartite: 1) multiple-section elementary and intermediate classes are costly. Graduate assistants are the least expensive to hire. 2) Older faculty dislike teaching beginners, resent correcting papers, have not unfrequently lost the requisite enthusiasms, prefer to work with upper-class students and graduates, and need sizable enrollments of these same graduate students if administrations are to allow

the offering of advanced courses. 3) Where will such numbers be found? They are generated from all the assistantships funded by institutions like mine. What a perfect solution! We get cheap teachers for the lower division classes and at the same time find a ready-made enrollment for the courses the senior staff prefers to teach. Everyone benefits, everyone save the students in the lower-division classes. It is scarcely realistic to expect assistants, most of them with little teaching experience, some of them of foreign culture and language, to teach <u>well</u> classes consisting mainly of young Americans with varying degrees of linguistic ability, coming from high schools which left them with enormous variations in grammatical knowledge and often as not a staggering array of learning problems enough to stump the most experienced among us dominies. Even given the enthusiasm characteristic of young assistants and a certain amount of supervision most departments do manage to provide, we are still asking far too much. To be blunt: a few exceptions here or there to the contrary notwithstanding, our elementary and intermediate foreign-language programs in the bigger universities tend to be a national disgrace. My own current fourth-semester class in elementary French, I must admit, is pretty discouraging. On the whole, the students, after a year and a half spent by most of them under the tutelage of assistants, have a paltry pittance to show for their efforts. Little vocabulary, less grammar, few idioms. Verb forms remain a foreign language to them. They pronounce indifferently; they can understand and answer uncomplicated questions in French, but only if couched in and answerable by patterns. (Oh, those pattern drills that demand so little ability, are of such limited value, and mislead student and teacher both, the one into thinking he has learned, the other that he has taught!) And they have acquired a small store of reasonably accurate

facts about French culture. It simply does not justify usurping some ten percent of a student's university experience during his four years spent with us.

I have a proposal to provide undergraduates with better instruction, to continue utilizing the cheap graduate student labor pool, to insure much better graduate class enrollments, to give the new, young teachers a better opportunity for improving their techniques under much more constant supervision than I have noticed at West Virginia University or elsewhere -- a proposal, in short, with something for just about everyone. A proposal, mirabile dictu, which does not ask for more money to implement. To wit:

The time-honored system for using graduate students, whose room-and-board at the least we must subsidize if we are to keep them among us, is to give them a couple of beginning classes to teach. We could (and rarely actually do) place them in less sensitive positions such as managing labs (currently rather out of favor) or working in offices or checking book purchase lists in the library, but deans rightly frown on spending middle-range money -- two to three thousand dollars or more per annum -- on lowest-range activities for which they could use work-study federal funds. And of course graduate students derive precious little teaching experience from such chores. The ideal solution, it might seem, would be one where assistants teach but do not have the sole responsibility, one where they learn under constant guidance. To be sure, in some schools, ours for instance, there is a course in Materials and Methods which each assistant is supposed to take, and I imagine almost all schools put an older teacher in charge of the younger personnel. A help, but too little, too late. It still leaves the majority of our freshmen and sophomores under teachers themselves to a large extent learners. Most of our potential majors are lucky if they ever see our sup-

posedly brightest luminaries, the professors who should be inspiring them to go on. For selfish, practical reasons this is undesirable, foreign languages not being rated high among careers coveted by the undergraduates and administrators not being loath to accuse pedagogic shortcomings they tolerate however reluctantly in disciplines more in demand. Our present system obviously does not get the most out of our assistants, much less entice larger enrollments of potential majors. What administrator does not cast a jaundiced eye at programs failing to produce impressive numbers of majors, or at least enrolees, per F.T.E.? But worse, on the more human level, the system is patently unfair to students themselves. They should have the right to sit under the best teachers we can provide. (I am amazed more of them have not demanded that right. It is a sad commentary both on our times and on the flawed quality of the adolescent mind that sit-ins and confrontations have been staged over vastly pettier concerns.)

So then, we substitute the upper staff for the lower, the senior teachers handling the lower-division courses. From this simple move all manner of blessings will flow. Students will get the best teachers (to be sure, age does not necessarily equate with excellence, but neither does youth). Since the older teachers will no longer have the time to teach as many advanced classes, there will be fewer offerings and consequently a better enrollment in those still available. The poverty of choice at first glance might seem an unwarranted hardship. Actually, not so. The current trend allows every new appointee to the permanent staff her or his pet seminar: French Writers of the Upper Sahara, Eighteenth-Century Spanish Farces after Lope de Vega, German-American Epic Poets. These are superimposed on an existing layer of unneeded specialities left from a previous generation of offerings extracted from Ph.D. dissertations and taught by

the likes of the present writer. All this might possibly be justified at the doctoral level, but is only too often digested as master's fare by students prone to refuse solider nourishment. Thus, our graduates come up for their comprehensives lacking important areas, even whole centuries: no Age of Louis XIV Drama, no Goethe, no Cervantes -- those old standbys outmoded but somehow basic.

The middle-rank faculty may object to so few plum courses being left that they will be condemned to a very bland teaching diet. True; let us then rotate the reduced course offerings among the staff from year to year, where feasible. Alternatively, we could limit advanced seminars to a maximum of one for the younger teachers, two for the old guard, out of an assumed workload of four courses per semester. Semi-advanced courses, such as surveys or composition and review grammar, for instance, could rate as borderline cases.

Consider still other advantages. The older staff will be forced to keep up with newer teaching trends and in touch with younger students, all of which cannot but result in some preservation of humility. Further, if we oldsters complain that we have had our stint of unpopular hours, large classes, the composing and correcting of tests, grammar tutorials, laboratory sessions, and endless office hours, the beauty of my proposal lies in the recognition of justness in that complaint. These hated chores will be largely in the hands of the still acquiescent, even eager, assistants. They will also take classes for senior members on days when the latter are away attending conferences, delivering papers, or otherwise engaged. Foreign-born assistants will be used as resource persons, for audiolingual drills, etc., etc. Greatly increased flexibility is not the least of the results from this plan.

As for the assistants themselves, there are the benefits of collaboration with the experienced senior staff. They will receive frequent critiques of their classroom effectiveness, learn to construct and grade tests; the classes will serve to illustrate the theoretical questions raised in their Materials and Methods class, and so on. The possibilities are almost endless: for instance, occasional or even regular sessions during which all the assistants assemble for a discussion of various problems germane to all foreign-language instruction -- those meetings to be chaired and led by various selected members of the staff.

Depending on schedules, if necessary, student teachers, preferably not before their second year, could handle one section of their normal two-section load on their own. This compromise would at least cut deeply into the number of sections undergraduates are forced to take under less than ideal instructors. Costs? Since no new staff nor increase in the number of assistants is contemplated, the administrative budget should remain constant.

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